

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



Layalina Productions Inc., 1250 24th Street NW, Suite 300 Washington, DC 20037

Vol.V No. 9, April 10, 2009-April 23, 2009

McHale Appointed

President Obama appointed Judith Mchale for the position of Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, according to The Briefing Room press release from the White House. Mchale has a background in law and worked as a media and communications executive focusing on company development and non-profits globally. Many in the media have questioned her experience and whether it makes her qualified for the position.

Much of the debate has been fueled by Marc Lynch's Foreign Policy blog where, despite his post's defensive title, "I have nothing against Judith Mchale!" he is clearly concerned with the nomination. Many bloggers quote Lynch as saying that Mchale is a "terrible, terrible pick." Lynch has defended himself claiming he is not convinced that she has the experience for the position.

Given that the job has been vacant for so long, Lynch hopes that Mchale is quickly confirmed and proves his suspicions wrong.

In Lost in Translation, Amy Harder reports on James Glassman's opinion of Mchale's appointment. The former Under Secretary is "thrilled that there is a nominee after nearly three months" and is pleased with the choice.

Glassman continues by saying that he is more interested in what Mchale perceives the job to be. Harder further points out that Glassman believes Marc Lynch was too hard on Mchale. She "certainly has the drive and talent to do the job," he adds.

Nancy Scola points out in her blog on techPresident that the shift to new media, Public Diplomacy 2.0, may help to explain the appointment of Mchale, as she has extensive experience in expanding media internationally through her executive work with Discovery International. This form of tech-savvy public diplomacy is what

Secretary Clinton is eager to continue and advance, starting with her "Digital Town Hall," which began under Glassman.

Kenneth Wollack argues for the Huffington Post that the position will require someone who can energize public-private partnerships and tap the great potential of communications technologies. Wollack believes that Mchale's experience with the Board of the National Democratic Institute and the international standing of the Discovery Channel make her a perfectly suited Under Secretary.

He notes, "Under her two decades of leadership, Discovery's reach expanded to 1.4 billion subscribers in 170 countries, with translations into more than 30 languages." The channel's emphasis is on both local and global communication strategy, which is the same approach that "should underpin US public diplomacy efforts."

Wollack suggests that Mchale's experience in these sectors means that she understands the issues at stake and will be able to revitalize public diplomacy programs in line with Clinton's vision of "smart power."

Pentagon Closes Down Propaganda Machine

Senior officials report that a Pentagon office responsible for coordinating Defense Department information campaigns overseas has been shut down in an effort by the Obama administration to distance itself from past practices that some military officers called propaganda, reports Thom Shanker for The New York Times.

According to military and civilian critics, the DoD office to support public diplomacy efforts overstepped its boundaries during the final years of the Bush administration "by trying to organize information

operations that violated Pentagon guidelines for accuracy and transparency."

Senior officials have said Michele A. Flournoy, the new Under Secretary of defense for policy, decided to eliminate the position of deputy secretary of defense for public diplomacy to ensure a better alignment of global communications efforts between the Defense Department and the military

In this issue:

McHale Appointed	1
Pentagon Closes Down Propaganda Machine	1
Iraqi Government Spars with Media	2
Media Forum Addresses Global Crisis	3
Arab Media Neutrality: Myth or Reality	3
Egypt Turns off Hezbollah TV	4
Restoring the Prestige of Science through TV	5
Saudi Arabia Cracks Down on TV Decoders	5
New Media Horizons in the Gulf	6
Rethinking Democracy Promotion	6
Skilled Diplomat or Apologist?	7
New Media Law Tightens UAE Government Control	8
References	10

and with the rest of the government.

The New York Times points out that the office was created in 2007 to coordinate the Defense Department's overseas information efforts with the rest of the government, in particular the White House, the State Department and American embassies. The Pentagon now pledges to support the White House and the State Department's efforts in communicating with foreign audiences.

“Because of the history of the office, we needed a fresh start in how we integrate the critical function of strategic communications across the board.”

A senior Pentagon official.

Even in a supporting role, the Defense Department has far greater resources in money, trained communications personnel and broadcast and print technology than any other government agency or department.

Another senior Defense Department official briefed on the decision said the military, by its size and global reach, remained one of the government's most visible tools for projecting American influence and defining its values, especially in operations short of combat, like humanitarian aid and disaster relief missions.

“The goal should be to produce words and actions that are matched,” the official said. “There still is a great need for a concerted effort in the planning stages of policy, execution and communications.”

Dan Weil reports for Newsmax that the Pentagon had been under criticism for straying beyond its guidelines late in the Bush administration, violating Pentagon

rules for accuracy and openness. Congress expressed concerns over the role of the Pentagon in public diplomacy efforts as well, reports the New York Times.

“Because of the history of the office, we needed a fresh start in how we integrate the critical function of strategic communications across the board,” a senior Pentagon official told the newspaper.

Iraqi Government Spars with Media

Iraq's military filed a lawsuit to shut down operations of Al-Hayat and Al-Sharqiya, two major Arab news stations in Iraq, alleging false reports regarding orders to arrest ex-detainees recently released by the US, reports The Associated Press.

Both news outlets quoted military spokesman Maj. Gen. Qassim Al-Moussawi as declaring the names of the ex-detainees and reported that photos of the released detainees had been distributed to checkpoints with orders to arrest them as part of an investigation into recent bombings in Baghdad. Al-Moussawi later refuted the quotes, saying “only ex-detainee files would be reviewed.”

The United States is seeking to release most of the 20,000 remaining detainees in the prisons it controls as part of the handover of authority to the Iraqis and also to encourage reconciliation.

Consequently Al-Hayat retracted the comments on its website and later explained they came from another unnamed official. “After this correction, they are not supposed to file a case against us,” said Mushrif Abbas, an Al-Hayat editor in Baghdad. However, Al-Moussawi protested that the retraction was insufficient and required that both media outlets publicly acknowledge the false attribution.

Al-Moussawi added that the complaint against Al-Hayat and Al-Sharqiya was filed with the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council and the Central Criminal Court. “The court would decide whether to order the media organization's correspondents to stop working,” further reports the AP.

Iraqi authorities often have been criticized for imposing media

restrictions since the US-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein in 2003, and Iraqi journalism standards are often considered lax with little oversight.

Analyst Mark Lynch points out on Foreign Policy that Al-Hayat is not a sensationalist media outlet and is probably more accurate than other Arab media. Like many papers, “it's stronger in covering some issues than others, but it has consistently had some of the best coverage of Iraqi politics,” he states.

Lynch notes that this may also be a move against the Saudi-owned newspaper, since the Iraqi government has been “deeply frustrated with Saudi Arabia's continuing foot-dragging on opening an embassy, forgiving debt, and so forth.”

“These attempts by some media to depict wanted persons as heroes targeted by security forces provoke hateful sectarian strife in order to damage Iraqi unity.”

Iraqi government Official.

Above all, Lynch agrees that the attempt to ban Al-Hayat is a serious blow to media freedom at a watershed moment in Iraqi political life.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi government accused the news media of deliberately seeking to promote sectarian strife, comment Rod Norland and Sam Dagher for The New York Times. The National Media Center of the Council of Ministers criticized local Arab and international news media concerning the series of arrests of members of the Awakening Council.

“These attempts by some media to depict wanted persons as heroes targeted by security forces provoke hateful sectarian

strife in order to damage Iraqi unity," the government said in a statement, adding that such reports "make us wonder about the true goals of these campaigns and the groups behind them."

The arrests are raising concerns among American military officials and diplomats. The groups include ex-insurgents who turned against Al-Qaeda and joined forces with the Americans. Some of their leaders claim the government is trying to marginalize them despite their contribution to improved security.

The government commented that some news organizations have launched "a coordinated campaign against the Iraqi government" with recent reports of strife between US-allied Sunni paramilitaries and Nouri Al-Maliki's Shia-led government.

The accusations came as tensions between the government and the councils boiled over last month when a local 'awakening' group in central Baghdad launched a two-day uprising after the arrest of their leader, reports The Associated Press. The government and the US military said there was evidence he was involved in subversive and criminal activity.

In another development, an Iraqi cartoonist demanded an apology from the police in the Shia holy city of Karbala for having confiscated two satirical drawings of Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki and other government officials. "What happened was an offense to freedom," the cartoonist Salman Abed said in a telephone interview to The New York Times. "We want to build a new country on liberal and democratic foundations."

What started as a minor incident when the police seized two of the 15 large drawings that Mr. Abed had been exhibiting on a street in central Karbala, escalated. Norland and Dagher explain that "several Iraqi media outlets have posted some of the cartoons on their websites, undercutting the authorities' effort to silence Mr. Abed." In one cartoon, Mr. Abed depicted Al-Maliki as a frustrated mechanic struggling to repair a car. The license plate says "muhasasa," Arabic for the government's ethnic and sectarian quotas. A road sign behind Al-Maliki says, "The road is long."

Media Forum Addresses Global Crisis

The eighth Arab Media Forum to be held in Dubai will look closely at how the media in the region is "weathering a period of change and crisis," reports GulfNews.

Topics spanning from the impact of the global financial crisis on media establishments and the failure of business journalism to diagnose the symptoms of the crisis in advance to the issuing of religious edicts on television and the coverage of the war in Gaza will be addressed.

Mariam Bin Fahd, executive director of Dubai Press Club, said sessions at the forum were designed to offer a true reflection of the current state of the media in the Arab world in terms of politics, technology and the socio-economic content.

She reveals, "Apart from the various sessions and workshops, we are also holding a special keynote address this time on investigative journalism."

The three workshops that will be held as part of the forum will focus on the proliferation of private television channels in Egypt, the mushrooming of popular heritage channels in the Arab world and the practice of fatwas being aired on television, reports Express.

The news site explains the sessions were designed with a view to make the proceedings of the event a true reflection of the current state of the media in the Arab world, in terms of politics, technology and the socio-economic content.

They will also focus on an increase in the number of print periodicals in the Arab world as opposed to their fast decline in the West. Other angles of discussion would be the emergence and evolution of the new media, Arabic versions of foreign television channels, and the work environment for foreign news agencies in the Arab world.

Arab Media Neutrality: Myth or Reality

The bias that is rampant in Arab media generates misinformation and is more likely to provoke conflicts in the Middle East, claims Sami Al-Rabaa for Family Security Matters. According to a recent study by the International Media Institute in Berlin, Germany, only 3% of Arabs read. The majority of Arabs watch TV for news and entertainment notes the news site.

Most of these media outlets are state-controlled, semi-official organs, or owned by oil rich Arabs from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The news site argues that these features make the media largely biased. "They misrepresent Western views, and critical, differentiated reporting is almost absent," suggests Al-Rabaa.

"Integrity has waned in the media we were supposed to uphold as examples, with language degenerating into convenient ambiguity at best and outright deception at worst."

Rime Allaf, Associate Fellow at London's Chatham House.

Deema, a Lebanese journalist based in Berlin who does not want to be identified by her last name, says, "The Arab media are filled with sentiments rather than facts. A journalist who sticks to facts is accused of being biased, and risks losing their job."

Al-Rabaa adds that Arab critical scholars and intellectuals are banned from publishing or taking part in TV

and radio debates, and concludes that “unless Arabs are properly and diversely informed and left expressing themselves freely, there is no chance for peace to become a reality in the Middle East.”

However, Rime Allaf, an Associate Fellow at London’s Chatham House, points out for Middle East Online that Western media was traditionally presented as a bastion of ethics that followed a stringent code of conduct. However, this reputation was tarnished by recent mishaps on reporting the conflict in Gaza and the war in Iraq.

Allaf notes, “In reality, most self-proclaimed fair and balanced media are deficient in more than one factor, usually revolving around the notion of freedom from bias, from censorship, or from giving a complete picture.” Allaf adds that in America, “integrity has waned in the media we were supposed to uphold as examples, with language degenerating into convenient ambiguity at best and outright deception at worst.”

Allaf argues that the New York Times’ apology one year after the invasion of Iraq that admitted to publishing the Bush administration’s stories without checking them and the recent BBC scandal in which it decided not to broadcast the Gaza emergency charity appeal demonstrate that Western media are also co-opted by political agendas. Arabs are exposed to numerous foreign media networks that are eager to follow the footsteps of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya to a lesser extent. Allaf cites several examples including the US’s Al-Hurra, France’s France 24, Britain’s BBC Arabic, Iran’s Al-Alam, Germany’s Deutsche Welle Arabia and Russia’s Rusiya Al-Youm. Despite the presence of the channels, Allaf explains that Arabs are satisfied with their regional networks.

“Arab media has a high hill to climb,” comments Allaf before concluding, “it must impose coverage of Arab affairs, in all their abundance and diversity, to be made within an Arab-designed frame, rather than the frames (including “Israel’s right to exist” and “anti-Semitism”) which enemies have successfully set as default for the last decades.”

Khaled Diab acknowledges for the Daily Star that Arab media outlets are also subject to the acrimony and polarization associated with conflicts, especially the Arab-Israeli

one. He argues that this polarization of conflicts has transformed media themselves into a veritable battlefield.

“Media outlets have the potential either to fuel the conflict by entrenching and confirming negative stereotypes, perpetuating hostility...or to advance the quest for peace by challenging and changing people’s perceptions,” he argues.

Diab believes the media should be a channel for creative and novel approaches to conflicts, as well as a conduit for debate. Highlighting the role social networking sites, Diab posits that they can be great tools for engaging and communicating.

Diab insists that more balanced media are essential if “we want to see a positive outcome to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”

The media has grown and become a real power, notes Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed for Asharq-Alwasat. Al-Rashed points out that many believe that modern media has taken a qualitative leap forward and has positively influenced their lives. He states, “I believe that the positives outweigh the negatives.”

While many areas that previously were isolated now have access to education, news and information, Al-Rashed argues that “the internet has to be utilized in the right way and promoted to the public.”

Al-Rashed concludes, “We have been presented with a precious gift and a golden opportunity and we should make the most of it. The internet can take you anywhere but you must choose your destination.”

Egypt Turns off Hezbollah TV

In the latest bout between pro-establishment forces and Hezbollah representatives in Egypt, a petition was submitted to an Egyptian court asking to revoke the license of the organization’s television station - Al-Manar, reports Ynet News. The petition maintains that the Shia-affiliated station recently began broadcasting false news reports about Egypt. Among these, Al-Manar was said to have accused Egypt of collaborating with the United States,

promoting Jewish interests and trying to “implement the Zionist agenda.”

The broadcasts, provided by the Egyptian satellite service ‘Nilesat’, make Al-Manar, along with hundreds of other Arab-language channels, available to millions in the country.

“This constitutes a national humiliation, creates confusion with our neighbors and sectarianism about different groups,” the petition claimed. Three weeks prior, Egypt boycotted an Arab League summit in protest to similar coverage by Al-Jazeera, whose headquarters are located in the summit’s host nation of Qatar.

Egypt’s petition against Al-Manar demanded that the station “stop using Egyptian broadcasting satellite Nilesat,” notes Naharnet. The lawsuit also criticized Hizbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah for “insulting the government, the president and the people by allowing Al-Manar to broadcast fabricated news about Egypt.”

“This constitutes a national humiliation, creates confusion with our neighbors and sectarianism about different groups.”

Egyptian officials in a petition to remove Al-Manar.

Diane Mukkaled with Asharq-Alwasat commented that Egyptian media attacked Hezbollah and its Secretary General, which was “unprecedented as part of a campaign by state television programs, newspapers, anchors and websites, all replete with disdain and accusations that crossed the media line.”

Mukkaled points out that besides violating the sovereignty of another state, “which in actual fact was the case in spite of what is said about supporting

the Palestinians and providing them with weapons, Hezbollah is dragging itself and Lebanon more importantly, into a regional conflict that Lebanon could not handle.” Hezbollah could further weaken the position of Lebanon in the region while destabilizing very fragile regional stability.

“Blatant sectarianism and the attacks against minorities by officials and commentators as a way of dealing with such ultra-sensitive and dangerous issues are as much at fault as Hezbollah’s action itself,” she states.

The violation of Egypt’s sovereignty, territory and interests is enough for Egypt to gain the support of others; it does not need to evoke illusions about the “Shiafication of Egypt or to use street language describing others as ‘monkeys’, which only adds to the tension.”

Restoring the Prestige of Science through TV.

Young Arab innovators are set to compete in the newly-launched TV contest “Stars of Science”, to be broadcast across the Arab region, reports the Arab Eye of Dubai.

This pan-Arab program will star 16 Arab students from 11 countries, chosen by a rigorous selection process which screened more than 5600 applications from all over the world. The candidates will have the opportunity to develop their own project of innovation in a state-of-the-art workshop, built for the show, at the recently-inaugurated Qatar Science & Technology Park (QSTP) in Doha.

Conceived as a pan-Arab program aiming to make science and technology accessible and attractive, “Stars of Science” will be broadcast all across the Arab World and will be available to a wide audience.

Broadcast from Doha, the reality show mixes entertainment with the more serious goal of developing viable scientific innovations, comments Zoi Constantine for The National.

The aim is also to promote science and learning and, perhaps in the process, find the next Ibn al Haitham, who invented the pinhole camera in the

10th century, or al Zahrawi, an Arab scientist and physician who developed more than 200 surgical instruments.

“The aim is to showcase the whole process of innovation – from inspiration, to the elaboration of a concept, its development and finally, its application” said Dr. Abdulla Al-Thani, Vice President, Education of Qatar Foundation in an interview with the Arab Eye of Dubai.

“Science and technology will now be given an entertaining twist through the very popular reality TV show format, making the topic accessible to all.”

Dr. Abdulla Al-Thani, Vice President, Education of Qatar Foundation.

For many centuries, Arabs were at the cutting edge of scientific research, comments Constantine. According to the UN Development Program, between 1980 and 2000, only 370 patents were issued to people in Arab countries, in contrast to more than 16,000 in South Korea alone during the same period.

Critics blame several factors including the education systems, limited funding and a lack of institutional support. “But, research and development in countries including Qatar and the UAE appears to be on the cusp of change,” notes Constantine.

In the meantime, Yousef Haik says “Stars of Science” may contribute to getting more young people involved in science in the first place.

The fifth and final episode, to be broadcast live on June 26 from Aspire sports Academy in Doha, will let the viewers vote for the winner of a \$300,000 prize, according to The Peninsula.

“Science and technology will now be given an entertaining twist through the very popular reality TV show format, making the topic accessible to all. We hope ‘Stars of Science’ will promote the innovative spirit of young people in the Arab world,” said Al-Thani.

Much like other reality TV programs, participants are filmed by dozens of cameras, including some hidden behind reflective glass windows on the futuristic set.

“Arab scientists started so much of physics, chemistry and other disciplines,” said Dr. Nagwa al Naga, a member of the Qatar Foundation’s steering committee. He concludes, “We developed the program to ... [show] viewers how real things happen from a dream or an idea of a young Arab, through the process of their successes and failures.”

Saudi Arabia Cracks Down on TV Decoders

In line with the policy of cracking down on satellite TV pirates, the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information recently enforced a nationwide ban on illegal TV decoder boxes and on the continuing theft of pay TV signals, reports Arab News. The ministries of commerce and finance are cooperating by imposing a ban on imports of decoders which will be held at Saudi customs.

“The move marks a major milestone in the Kingdom’s efforts to protect intellectual property rights,” said Abdul Rahman Al-Hazzaa, deputy minister of culture and information. Al-Hazzaa claims that this will be an effective measure to combat problems related to piracy and copyrights. He added, “It violates religious values, weakens the local economy, tarnishes the country’s image and hurts consumers.”

Illegal TV decoder boxes, which are used to decrypt pay TV channels, have been proliferating across the Gulf market, prompting countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar to implement aggressive campaigns to curb their import and sale.

These efforts have been praised by regional

media directors who consider piracy a real problem. Software engineer Arif Kamal, who works for a local IT company, claims that buyers of these decoders end up paying a heavy price regardless due to the fact that TV companies often require updates and maintenance.

Saudi Arabia represents the largest pay TV market in the GCC and one of the most significant markets in the entire MENA region, according to Digital Production.

“Illegal TV decoders violate religious values, weaken the local economy, tarnish the country’s image and hurt consumers.”

Abdul Rahman Al-Hazzaa, deputy minister of culture and information.

“This crime victimizes companies that invest heavily in the acquisition of broadcasting rights, and also threatens the employment of thousands of hard-working employees in the TV broadcasting sector,” said Scott Butler, CEO of Arabian Anti-piracy Alliance (AAA).

Abdul Mohsin Al-Joyan, regional director for Orbit Satellite Television in Saudi Arabia, also praised the actions of the Kingdom’s government. “These decoder boxes are against the interests of consumers and investors. They also contribute to promoting TV channels and content that is against the morals and values of our society,” he said.

In other developments, UAE authorities have vowed to crack down on the illegal distribution of Indian pay TV operator Dish TV services in the country, reports Digital Production.

The signal of the Indian direct-to-home (DTH) satellite network is available in parts of the Middle East, however Dish TV has no broadcasting rights in these territories.

“The right to protect intellectual property is not only logical but a legal right as well; illegal pay TV is simply an unacceptable violation of intellectual property rights,” said Butler.

The boxes, which are illegally imported from India, are required to receive Dish TV and are available from unauthorised dealers across the Emirates. The new directives, announced by Mohammed Bin Abdulaziz Alshihhi, general manager of the UAE Ministry of Economy, will see that the police and other authorities tighten restrictions on illegal Dish TV dealers.

New Media Horizons in the Gulf

Endavo Media’s internet TV Platform is harnessing millions of viewers for Etisalat, the national telecommunications giant based in the United Arab Emirates, with presence in over 18 countries across Middle East and Africa, reports Business intelligence.

The Endavo Media internet TV platform provides powerful ways to deliver online programming through social media features such as sharing of content, commenting, chatting, and many others that increase audience size and generate new revenue.

“I do foresee new business avenues opening up for broadcasters and content providers to create unique content catering to these diverse customer segments and providing them the best of what they require,” said Khalifa al Shamsi, Vice President of marketing for Etisalat.

Peter Contardo, Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for Endavo Media concurred and added, “Our work with Etisalat demonstrates to content producers and broadcasters of all types the strength and superior scalability of our digital broadcast network...The ability for our clients to quickly and easily build brand and generate revenue through online distribution, while maintaining complete control of their media, is the cornerstone of our internet TV platform.”

In other developments, Yemen’s Islah Party is preparing to launch a pilot broadcast for their new television station via satellite,

reports the Yemen Observer. The channel will be accessible to their sizeable following on all satellite broadcasting fields, said a source at the Islah Party.

The source said that a great number of programs have been prepared and formatted to address national issues. The source confirmed, “The station refused financial support from all sources other than benevolent Islah Party members, Sheikh Hamid Al-Ahmar for example.”

Islah sent a delegation to the Nile Sat Company to negotiate the launch of the channel from their satellite. However, the bid was refused on the grounds that the consent of the Yemeni security authorities was needed given that Islah is an opposition party.

The channel will start its first days with recitations from the Qur’an, sayings of the Prophet, chants and sermons. It then will move on to developing varied news bulletins and political and cultural programs.

Rethinking Democracy Promotion

Despite democracy promotion being at the forefront of US foreign policy under the Freedom Agenda, The New America Foundation says that “not only has the [agenda] failed to fulfill its promise, it has likely set back America’s overall promotion efforts.” The Foundation is skeptical of the Obama administration’s ability to transform America’s image abroad, arguing for extensive changes in the understanding of democracy promotion and foreign assistance.

While “the global spread of democracy [serves] America’s political, diplomatic and economic interests,” and is consistent with deep-rooted social values, “the challenges inherent in democracy promotion will not be met by creating new programs. What is needed is a bureaucratic brush clearing.”

The Foundation recommends revitalizing, not eliminating, US democracy promotion by placing international development as the focal point of US foreign policy and empowering the US Agency for International Development. It suggests

channeling funding more effectively into development or humanitarian assistance, and supporting the work of civil society abroad.

In other debates on the role of democracy in foreign policy and American hegemony, Walter Rogers for the Christian Science Monitor asserts, “Our world is changing far more rapidly and profoundly than we, or our politicians, will admit. America’s own triple-A rating, its superpower status, is being downgraded as rapidly as its economy.”

Rogers cites the lack of progress in Afghanistan, the disintegration of nuclear-armed Pakistan, the empowerment of Iran as a consequence of the Iraq war, “Washington’s uncritical support of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians,” and importantly, the use of torture, which “shattered whatever moral edge America enjoyed before 2003.”

“Americans need to acknowledge that war, like politics, as the art of the possible, and both have their limits...It is time to lower our geopolitical sights and end America’s unrealistic crusade [for democracy]. We shouldn’t expect ‘them’ to be like ‘us.’” he concludes.

El-Sayed Amin Shalabi, executive director for the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, writes for Al-Ahram Weekly that is not the goal of democracy but the methods to achieve it that alienated and marginalized potential reformers in the region.

Since the US views democracy as an issue of national security and pushed for greater activism in Arab nations, there was a drive for “societies to evolve and governments to accommodate.” However, Shalabi notes that the Americans “balked” as reforms began bringing “anti-American Islamists to power,” contrary to Washington’s goals, thereby shifting the promotion of democracy to individual cases.

Matt Duss for Think Progress concurs, arguing against Andrew Exum’s assertion that the neoconservative era discredited the “right” end of democracy in the Arab-speaking world and in domestic politics.

“I don’t think it’s really “politically incorrect” to say that Bush’s democratic rhetoric energized the discussion of representative government and human rights abroad as much as it is simply

dishonest not to mention that most of that discussion revolved around how incompetent and counterproductive his actual policies for doing these things were,” writes Duss.

Shalabi says that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s promotion of defense, diplomacy and development, rather than “that one last ‘d’, namely democracy,” does not indicate that the administration values democracy less than before. Rather, it “prefers a softer approach that involves the improvement of economic and educational conditions, and not just the holding of elections.”

“The challenges inherent in democracy promotion will not be met by creating new programs. What is needed is a bureaucratic brush clearing.”

The New America Foundation.

Michael Signer for The New Republic contends, “‘Democracy fatigue’ might be an understandable reaction to the Bush administration. Yet turning away from freedom as a touchstone of our national security policy – especially today – would be dangerous.” While the structural elements of democracy were supported by Bush, the “cultivation of constitutionalism – a vibrant, anti-authoritarian civic culture” should be the current goal in order to avoid the “illiberal democracy”.

“A foreign policy grounded on constitutionalism would invest substantially in a constellation of concrete policy goals, including the expansion of civic education, market economics, and election training.” While supporting advocacy of political freedom, free exchange of ideas and tolerance, Signer hastens to add that this

approach must differ in different cultural and political contexts, as well as remove “democracy as a pawn in regime change” in order to build trust among peoples and institutions.

Skilled Diplomat or Apologist?

President Obama’s outreach to the Muslim world on his overseas trip was “just one part of the recent Islamic outreach blitz engineered by the White House,” comments US News and World Report.

On his visit to Turkey last week, reports The New York Times, Obama “made important progress toward recalibrating America’s relations with the Islamic world.” The newspaper further comments that the president “steered away from the poisonous post-9/11 clash of civilizations mythology.”

On Al Jazeera, Adam Boulton, political editor of UK-based Sky News, remarks that “the new president recognizes that there is an urgent need for the US to press the ‘reset button’ with the Islamic world.”

Al Jazeera further comments that Obama’s trip to Turkey “was seen as a very positive move in the Arab media and among the Arab and Muslim public to engage with the Muslim world. It was also seen as a clear and purposeful diversion from the methods of his predecessor.”

Added to the speech at the Turkish parliament, observes the Christian Science Monitor, are “a multitude of symbolic gestures: early phone calls to Arab leaders, the announcement that the US will close Guantanamo Bay, the appointment of former Sen. George Mitchell as special envoy to the Middle East, an overture video to Iran, and the trip to Turkey itself (followed by a surprise stop in Iraq).”

Praise for the president featured prominently in many media outlets and across the blogosphere following the overseas trip. Rob Asghar of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy argues that unlike Bush’s “provincial and prickly [style] that presumed that what was

best for America was best for the world, Obama's style recalls the America that the world most respects and envies - a multicultural person who rose from obscurity, through opportunity, to build bridges rather than walls among peoples."

"The new president recognizes that there is an urgent need for the US to press the 'reset button' with the Islamic world."

Adam Boulton, political editor of UK-based Sky News.

"Obama may not have produced any pigeons out of his hat yet. But look at what he has already set out to do. It gives you real hope about 'change,'" remarks Arab News. The Christian Science Monitor similarly adds that "bridge building does begin with words and attitudes."

Despite the praise, many viewed the trip in an entirely different light. Commentary Magazine argues that Obama's "obsession with appeasing the forces of militant Islam through flattery and oily sycophancy, embodied in his now famous bow from the waist before Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah," is disturbing.

The Washington Times describes the bow as a "shocking display of fealty to a foreign potentate," and exclaims that the president "belittled the power and independence of the United States."

Quite differently, Scott MacLeod of Time's Mideast Blog argues that "Obama's gesture in London seemed to be simply his gracious, spontaneous way of greeting Abdullah. That's fitting for a variety of reasons, beyond any rules of diplomatic protocol."

Media Matters notes that "conservative media figures and outlets have accused Obama of turning the trip into an 'apology tour' and smeared the president as the 'Apologizer in Chief.'"

The site points out that on his Fox News program, Glenn Beck claimed that "Obama is apologizing to the Frenchy French for our arrogance." Likewise, on Fox News' Hannity, Sean Hannity described Obama "coming off a tour where he's constantly apologizing for America, referring to us as an arrogant country, dictating to the world our views, and that we're not a Christian nation."

Aside from these accusations, skepticism abounds. On Al Jazeera, Arab media expert Fadi Hakura asks, "Will the US policies change towards the Middle East? Will Obama conduct serious negotiations with Iran to resolve the nuclear issue, or is it really that President Obama is following similar policies, foreign policies to George W. Bush, but with a different face?"

Matt Armstrong of the Mountain Runner blog argues that Obama's speech in the Muslim world "is at best a small sliver of 'public diplomacy' not to be confused with the full spectrum of options of engagement through communication, exchange, development, capacity building, health programs, and even countering adversarial messages."

Moving forward, Tehran Times suggests that President Obama cannot repair [the US-Muslim World] relationship alone. "We will need to see more educational and professional exchanges, sister cities programs, jointly produced media products, co-developed cultural activities, joint scientific research projects, co-developed social networking sites, co-produced fundraisers for humanitarian causes, co-written textbooks," continues the site.

The UAE's The National argues that Obama "must also articulate a unifying theme for engagement of the Muslim world," and the Christian Science Monitor points out that "hard policy choices lie ahead that are bound to inflame Muslims and non-Muslims, depending on the path taken."

In an attempt to summarize the president's recent efforts in the Muslim world, Arab News remarks, "Nobody ever thought bridging the gulf that the neocons spent eight long years digging up would be easy. But Obama is at least trying."

New Media Law Tightens UAE Government Control

Human Rights organizations lambasted the draft of a new media law in the United Arab Emirates that would curb free speech while increasing the government's control over the media industry, reports the Financial Times. Renowned for its free media environment and for being a media hub, it now enjoys international recognition.

"The law will muzzle the press, preventing honest reporting about the country's continuing financial crisis or about its rulers," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Its vague clauses and harsh fines will almost guarantee arbitrariness by government authorities and self-censorship by the media."

"The law will muzzle the press, preventing honest reporting about the country's continuing financial crisis or about its rulers."

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

As stated by the Associated Press, the media in the UAE, as in all Middle Eastern countries, tends to avoid reporting on anything that may irritate the government.

However, once foreign news agencies entered the country, the government "promised to allow more press freedoms

than in other countries of the region.” Samer Muscati, the head of research for the UAE at Human Rights Watch, said, “We were hoping for a model media law (in the UAE) for others in the region to follow.” The new proposed law is squashing this opportunity.

The law has yet to be implemented; it was passed the Federal National Council, the UAE legislation, but has not been ratified by the UAE president, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, reports the Financial Times.

Many academics, journalists, human rights activists and lawyers are encouraging the president not to sign the draft into law.

The bill now awaits cabinet and presidential approval in the Gulf Arab state, which does not have a parliament, reports Reuters.

“The draft law in its current form is obscure and violates many freedoms, gains and basic rights, and hinders free media and newspaper work in the country,” a group of more than 100 civil society figures said in a petition to Sheikh Khalifa.

If passed, organizations that have criticized the government or the royal family may be fined up to \$1.35m, or Dh5m. Any member of the media who is charged as having misguided the public or “harmed” the economy” may be fined up to \$135,000, or Dh500,000, reports the Financial Times.

According to Reuters, members of the media can also be fined for denigrating the president or any rulers or deputies of the seven emirates that compose the UAE, as well as for belittling the country’s reputation or damaging UAE relations with other countries. The law also allows for the complete closure of newspapers if they receive an infraction.

Human Rights Watch strongly opposed the new law, stating, “It is plagued with problems such as ‘draconian fines’ and ‘harsh registration requirements.’” The Committee to Protect Journalists is also against the law, claiming that it “restricts free speech and strengthens self-censorship among journalists,” reports Press TV.

Although Human Rights Watch opposes

the law, it acknowledges that it is slightly better than the current, yet not highly enforced media law. For example, accused persons will be tried in court with the opportunity to appeal the verdict. The law also protects journalists from being required to reveal their sources.

According to the Washington-based think tank Freedom House, the UAE is one of many Middle Eastern countries that tightly censor its media. Freedom House ranks every country in the Middle East and North Africa as having a “not free” media with the exception of Lebanon, Kuwait, Egypt and Israel, which in their terms is the only country that has a truly “free press.”

References

- [1]April 14, 2009. "President Obama Announces More Key Administration Posts." The White House: The Briefing Room. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/President-Obama-Announces-More-Key-Administration-Posts-4/14/09/.
- Armstrong, Matt. April 9, 2009. "The False Hope of the President's Public Diplomacy." MountainRunner.us. http://mountainrunner.us/2009/04/false_hope.html.
- Cohen, Michael. April 10, 2009. "80 Days and Counting." Democracy Arsenal. <http://www.democracyarsenal.org/2009/04/80-days-and-counting.html>.
- Cormen, Steven R. April 10, 2009. "Introducing the PD Chief Count-Up Clock." COMPOS Journal. <http://comops.org/journal/2009/04/10/introducing-the-pd-chief-count-up-clock/>.
- Harder, Amy. April 16, 2009. "Glassman Weighs In On His Successor At State." Lost in Translation. <http://lostintransition.nationaljournal.com/2009/04/glassman-mchale.php>.
- Lynch, Marc. April 17, 2009. "I have nothing against Judith McHale!" Foreign Policy. http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/17/i_have_nothing_against_judith_mchale.
- Scola, Nancy. April 16, 2009. "The Right Pick to Lead State's Public Diplomacy." techPresident. <http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/right-pick-lead-states-public-diplomacy>.
- [2]Shanker, Tom, April 15, 2009. "Pentagon Closes Office Accused of Propaganda Under Bush." Washington, DC: The New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/16/us/politics/16policy.html?_r=1&ref=us.
- Weil, Dan, April 16, 2009. "White House Closing Controversial Pentagon Office." Newsmax: http://www.newsmax.com/us/pentagon_closes_office/2009/04/16/203767.html.
- [3]Abdul-Zahra, Qassim, April 13, 2009. "Iraq Accuses Some Media of Provoking Strife." Baghdad : The Associated Press: http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hwK_

The Layalina Review is brought to you thanks to a grant from The Scholl Foundation.

Compiled by Layalina Staff. The views expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc. Inaugurated in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, private sector corporation, Layalina Productions, Inc. is dedicated to bridging the growing divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialogues through effective commercial television programming. Layalina develops and produces informative and entertaining Arabic-language programming for licensing to satellite and cable television networks throughout the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Layalina is funded solely through tax-deductible donations from individuals and corporations, and through grants by foundations based in the US and the Arab world. Please support Layalina by making a tax-deductible donation. Visit www.layalina.tv or call 202-776-7761 for more information.